

## **AAUW Atlanta Branch Public Policy Update - March 31, 2022**

### **Georgia Legislative Update - A Few Items of Note**

**Budget** - On March 16, the Governor signed the amended 2022 budget, which funds the state through the end of its fiscal year on June 30, 2022. Amendments to the budget include \$5,000 raises for university system and state employees, \$2,000 bonuses for K-12 teachers and a \$250 million increase in Medicaid spending. The amended budget also includes funds to replace outdated correctional facilities and \$1.6 billion in income tax credits for Georgia taxpayers.

**Book Banning** - Georgia lawmakers gave final approval on 3/30 to legislation that would change the process for removing books from schools due to parent complaints about obscenity. Senate Bill 226 now goes to Gov. Brian Kemp for his signature. It would expedite the process for removing books and other content seen as “harmful to minors.” If it becomes law, principals will have seven business days to decide whether to remove contested works, and 10 business days to inform the complainant of the decision. The local school board would have 30 calendar days to decide any appeals.

**Banning requirement for “Vaccine Passports”** - The Georgia House of Representatives voted on 3/29 to approve a bill that bans state agencies, city and county governments, and local school districts from requiring their staff members or the public whom they do business with to be vaccinated against COVID-19. The bill was aimed at two metro Atlanta cities (Brookhaven and Decatur) that, at least at one time, had policies requiring their employees to be vaccinated or undergo regular COVID-19 surveillance testing. There is a one-year sunset due to the acknowledged rapidly changing situation in the midst of a pandemic. If passed, the law would be automatically repealed on June 30, 2023. The bill would not stop the governor from requiring vaccines as part of his emergency powers. The legislation originated in the Senate, but because the House made some changes, it will require another Senate vote before it can go to the Governor’s desk.

**Mental Health Bill** - Georgia lawmakers passed sweeping changes to the state’s mental health care system on 3/30 after reaching Senate-House agreement on language aimed at requiring health insurers to pay for mental health and substance abuse treatment. House Bill 1013 passed with a 54-0 vote in the Senate and a 166-0 vote in the House, and is now headed to Gov. Brian Kemp’s desk for his signature or veto. Debate over mental health care changes has been ongoing for years, and became a highlighted issue of the 2022 session when House Speaker David Ralston introduced the bill. After the Senate made changes to the House’s original measure, new wording was agreed Wednesday in the latest version of the bill that would require insurers to follow independent standards and block them from deciding for themselves what they would pay for, bringing Georgia’s law in line with existing federal requirements that health insurers provide the same level of benefits for mental health disorders as they do for physical illness. Changes under the bill are projected to cost tens of millions in additional state spending. One provision aimed at boosting the state’s mental health workforce would forgive loans for people studying to become mental health professionals. If signed, the new law will take effect July 1.